WILL HURD
23RD DISTRICT, TEXAS

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE MODERNIZATION AND READINESS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AND WARFIGHTER SUPPORT

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–4323

317 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225–4511

SAN ANTONIO FEDERAL BUILDING
727 E. CESAR CHAVEZ BLVD.
SAN ANTONIO, TX 78206

1104 WEST 10TH
DEL RIO, TX 78840
(830) 422–2040

124 SOUTH HORIZON
SOCORRO, TX 79927
(915) 235–6421

100 SOUTH MONROE STREET
EAGLE PASS, TX 78852
(210) 784–5023

PECOS COUNTY COURTHOUSE
103 WEST CALLAGHAN
FORT STOCKTON, TX 79735
(210) 245–1548

July 7, 2020

Secretary David Bernhardt
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt:

I write to you requesting that you dedicate the Department of the Interior's support for the restoration of Comanche Springs in West Texas.

Comanche Springs was once one of the five largest springs in Texas, producing 30 million gallons of surface flow a day in the Chihuahuan Desert. The spring supported native populations and early settlers through the 1940s, when it began to sputter. It finally went dry in the 1950s due to significant groundwater pumping in the spring's zone of influence.

The sudden demise of the springs took with it the reliability of more than 20,000 acre-feet of surface water rights still held by the Pecos County Water Control and Improvement District No. 1 and extirpated the endemic population of now-endangered Comanche Springs pupfish.

For seventy years, Comanche Springs went quiet. Yet over the last decade, the springs have begun flowing again in the late winter months when the aquifer rebounds from summer irrigation pumping. Now, a scientific and economic assessment led by Texas Water Trade and The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment at Texas State University indicate that the springs could be restored to year-round flow, creating permanent economic and ecological benefits.

In 2018, with a generous grant from the Fort Stockton Convention and Visitors Bureau and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Meadows Center and Texas Water Trade began assessing the feasibility of a market-based restoration of Comanche Springs. In cooperation with the Middle Pecos Groundwater Conservation District, which now regulates pumping from the aquifer feeding Comanche Springs, the partners identified a set of market-based strategies that could be deployed for the permanent restoration of these springs.

Their market-based approach is consistent with the U.S. Department of the Interior's approach to managing the water resources of the American West. The Bureau of Reclamation has already committed resources to the spring's restoration through a $150,000 Applied Science grant to improve understanding of groundwater-surface water connectivity in the spring's zone of influence. This science will be used to support design of a cost-effective market to incentivize groundwater owners to reduce their pumping.

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

In addition, the Natural Resources Conservation Service has awarded $1.1 million in federal funding for on-farm water conservation investments in the spring's zone of influence. Alongside that, oil and gas producers partnering with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation have dedicated $300,050 to capitalize a voluntary market with groundwater users to prompt the spring back to year-round flow. This voluntary market approach would build on the successes of the San Antonio portion of the Edwards Aquifer, where a robust water market has enabled rapid population growth, continued farming and water reliability for people and endangered species.
This work is of high importance to the City of Fort Stockton, as it has the potential to drive economic development from ecotourism. Texas Water Trade estimates that restoring the spring to year-round flow and revitalizing the historic bathhouse to feature a spring-fed pool like nearby Balmorhea would generate $4 million a year in non-local spending, creating 72 permanent jobs.
Recruitment of federal resources to this spring restoration—the largest ever attempted globally—is more critical than ever before. Earlier this month, the Cities of Midland, Abilene and San Angelo announced a long-term water purchase agreement with the largest groundwater rights holder in the spring's zone of influence. You can read more about that agreement here. This new, constant source of demand makes it imperative that we speed delivery of demand- and supply-side options to reduce groundwater pumping in the spring's zone of influence. With a strategic commitment of resources from the U.S. Department of the Interior, the science suggests that conjunctive management of the region's groundwater and surface water resources could support municipal water supply, farming and perennial springflow.

Fortunately, the Department of Interior administers multiple programs whose resources directly align with the tools needed to restore Comanche Springs. Interior's commitment is a good first step in what I hope will be sustained dedication of agency resources to the restoration of this desert treasure.

The Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART program is a particularly relevant resource for Comanche Springs. The Bureau's Water Marketing Strategy program supporting development of water markets between willing buyers and sellers would assist local partners in the development of water marketing strategy for the springs. Typically, Reclamation provides up to $400,000 for strategies to be completed within a specified time frame and the Bureau's expertise and participation would be most welcomed.

Another relevant program is WaterSMART's Water and Energy Efficiency grant program, which focuses generating quantifiable water savings through local projects such as canal lining, piping projects, irrigation flow measurement and canal automation. With funding of up to $1 million per project, we see numerous opportunities for increased efficiency in the region, which in turn would address groundwater supply. There are several partners in the area that are excellent candidates for WaterSMART grants and projects, and we would welcome the Bureau's support.

The Water Marketing and the Water and Energy Efficiency grant programs would be our first focus of priority. Longer-term, we believe the area's potential participation in the Title XVI Water Reclamation and Reuse program and the Drought Response program could create opportunities for durable infrastructure solutions to reduce demand on the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer. Both of these programs would bring additional assistance to the area and would facilitate the restoration of Comanche Springs.

WILL HURD
23RD DISTRICT, TEXAS

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE MODERNIZATION AND READINESS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE AND WARFIGHTER SUPPORT

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–4323

317 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225–4511

SAN ANTONIO FEDERAL BUILDING
727 E. CESAR CHAVEZ BLVD.
SAN ANTONIO, TX 78206

1104 WEST 10TH
DEL RIO, TX 78840
(830) 422–2040

124 SOUTH HORIZON
SOCORRO, TX 79927
(915) 235–6421

100 SOUTH MONROE STREET
EAGLE PASS, TX 78852
(210) 784–5023

PECOS COUNTY COURTHOUSE
103 WEST CALLAGHAN
FORT STOCKTON, TX 79735
(210) 245–1548

In addition, the US Fish and Wildlife Service Wildlife Conservation Fund/Section 6 grant program could provide meaningful resources to establishment of a groundwater market to support perennial springflow.

This project is worthy of sustained and significant federal participation and support. To my knowledge, a spring restoration of this scale has never been attempted, making a voluntary market-based restoration of Comanche Springs an effort of both statewide, national and international significance.

With your help, I believe that we can create a future of water abundance for Fort Stockton and its regional neighbors, while honoring the property rights and market forces that Texans value. I look forward to working closely with you to ensure that Comanche Springs receives federal resources at a scale proportionate to its economic and ecological value.

Sincerely,

Will Hurd

Will Hurd
Member of Congress

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER